

# Farmland Access Service

*Local Farms for Local Food*



The mission of SAHC's Farmland Access Service is to provide farmers with opportunities to purchase or lease affordable farmland so that they can initiate or expand agricultural businesses. Supporting local communities, local food production, and the long-term productive use of farmland are all goals of this initiative.



Sharing the harvest from SAHC's farm in Alexander, NC.

In 2005, Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy (SAHC) established its Farmland Program to preserve working agricultural lands important to the natural and cultural heritage of Western North Carolina and East Tennessee.

We build relationships with agricultural landowners to place voluntary conservation easements on their land—protecting our most vital agricultural soils from development in perpetuity.

The success of the program has resulted in protection of over 5,000 acres throughout the region, with a focus on the significant farming communities of Fairview, Sandy Mush, Bethel, and Spring Creek.

Our work to preserve productive farmland in this region ensures that there will be land available for local food production and consumption for current and future generations.

Even with our successes in protecting significant agricultural lands, the farming population of this region continues to age, and more and more farms are threatened by development. Statewide, 59% of farms have principal operators older than 55, and the average age of farmers in the French Broad

region is almost 70 years. Additionally, even though there is an increasing number of new farmers interested in continuing the farming heritage of this region, gaining access to high quality farmland is one of the most difficult obstacles for beginning farmers.

For these reasons, there is growing concern that farmland in the area, whether protected from development or not, may not remain in production.

In response to this concern, we have developed an initiative within our Farmland Program to increase access to land for beginning farmers and expanding operations.

Our past work conserving agricultural land provides us with the necessary experience to provide this service. We are well prepared to begin this addition to our Farmland Program and excited to embark on the next step in assisting local farmers and keeping agricultural lands productive.

## Objectives

- **Accelerate existing farm operations** – Providing capital to farmers with the purchase of development rights on their land (agricultural conservation easements).
- **Create farm ownership opportunities** – Providing farm lands owned by the Conservancy for sale at agricultural value to farmers interested in purchasing land.
- **Create farm leasing opportunities** – Connecting farmers interested in leasing land with Conservancy landowners that may have land available for lease.
- **Provide incubator program for beginning farmers** – Supplying access to land and equipment, as well as support, training, and implementation tools for beginning farmers through an incubator program on SAHC's 103-acre farm in Alexander, NC.





## Seeking Farmland?

SAHC will develop qualification standards that farmers seeking to buy or lease land must meet to participate in the program. This will involve an application process to ensure that the farmers have enough experience and planning to successfully manage the land and keep it in production.



## Leave a Lasting Legacy with Your Farm!

As a part of our Farmland Access Service, SAHC will make sure that your valuable farmland remains productive and in good hands while continuing the agricultural heritage of this region. SAHC will accept donated farms and purchase farms when funds are available. Your farm will then be permanently protected, and, through a competitive process, provided for sale at agricultural value to farmers in need of land. This service will provide much needed affordable farmland to beginning farmers & expanding operations, as well as ensure that your land stays in production.

## Implementation

### Opportunities for Existing Farms

As a key component of SAHC's Farmland Program and Access Service, agricultural conservation easements secure family farms and increase affordability for farms by providing capital in exchange for development rights. The capital that a farmer receives through this process is often used to keep the farm in the family, make improvements to the existing farm operation, and/or acquire more land for farming. For new farm owners, selling development rights on their land will help recoup some of the cost of purchasing the farm. Agricultural conservation easements help to ensure the economic viability of family farming in the region.

### Farm Ownership Opportunities

One of the primary ways the program will provide farmers with access to land will be through expanding farm ownership opportunities. We will accept farmland donations and purchase farms when funds are available. SAHC will then sell this land at its agricultural value to a farmer and work with him/her to place a conservation easement on the property, protecting it in perpetuity. This will give farmers who otherwise could not afford high land prices the opportunity to purchase a farm of their own.

Providing protected farmland at lower costs helps ensure it will continue being farmed into the future.

### Farm Leasing Opportunities

For some beginning farmers, leasing land is a more appropriate and affordable option than buying.

We will help improve farmland access by facilitating relationships between farmers who are looking for land to lease and landowners with farmland available for lease. We will provide lease agreement examples and technical assistance to help facilitate matches between farmers and landowners.

As opportunities arise, we will also make available for lease lands that the organization owns in fee.

### Incubator Program

Another component of the Farmland Access Service will be SAHC's new incubator program on our farm in Alexander, NC.

The 103-acre farm was donated to SAHC in 2010. It includes 35 acres of gently to moderately-sloped grazing land and 60 acres of woodlands and stream corridors. SAHC plans to use the farm to host a small-scale incubator program to provide beginning farmers with temporary access to land, equipment, and infrastructure at reduced rates, as well as training to help prepare them for successful farm management and ownership. Assisting these developing farmers will help fill the gap left by those reaching retirement age and keep valuable Western North Carolina farmland productive.



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